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Transculturation, transliteracy and generative poetics

What effect are recent developments in global communications having on language and its readers and writers; those defined through their relations with language? What happens to our identity, as linguistic beings, when our means of communication and associated demographics shift? What is driving this? Is it the technology, the migrations of people or a mixture of these factors? How are these dynamics reflected, within and upon, in contemporary creative practices with language and new media?



Mapas Mundi

Language is motile, polymorphic and hybrid. Illuminated manuscripts, maps, graphic novels, the televisual and the web are similar phenomena in that they evidence language to be something that has never been restricted to the word. Language has always included the visual, aural and tactile.



Dead Sea Scroll

The widely held assumption that the written word is the ultimate source of knowledge/power (a hermeneutic) has never been the case. Don Ihde's 'expanded hermeneutics' (Ihde 1999), proposes, as part of an expanded system of signification, that what appear to be novel representations of phenomena and knowledge are not necessarily new. Meaning, and the value that derives from it, has been encoded in diverse forms and media for millennia. Only a few of these resemble the classic written text that was assumed, in conventional hermeneutics, to be the ultimate source of meaning. In a number of cultures the written was word never assigned this peculiar status as the primary repository of knowledge and thus was not invested with the authority that flows from that.

European hermeneutics, along with the pre-eminence of the word, is a product of an education and knowledge system with largely Medieval origins, established in part by the Roman Catholic Church. The modern university, as we recognise it today, evolved during the enlightenment. Its departmental structures and hierarchies can be regarded as maps or diagrammatic visualisations of how knowledge has evolved and come to be relatively valued across disciplines. Knowledge and language are bound together within the resultant taxonomies, reflecting the ideological foundations of knowledge/language as ecclesiastic, nationalist and industrial.



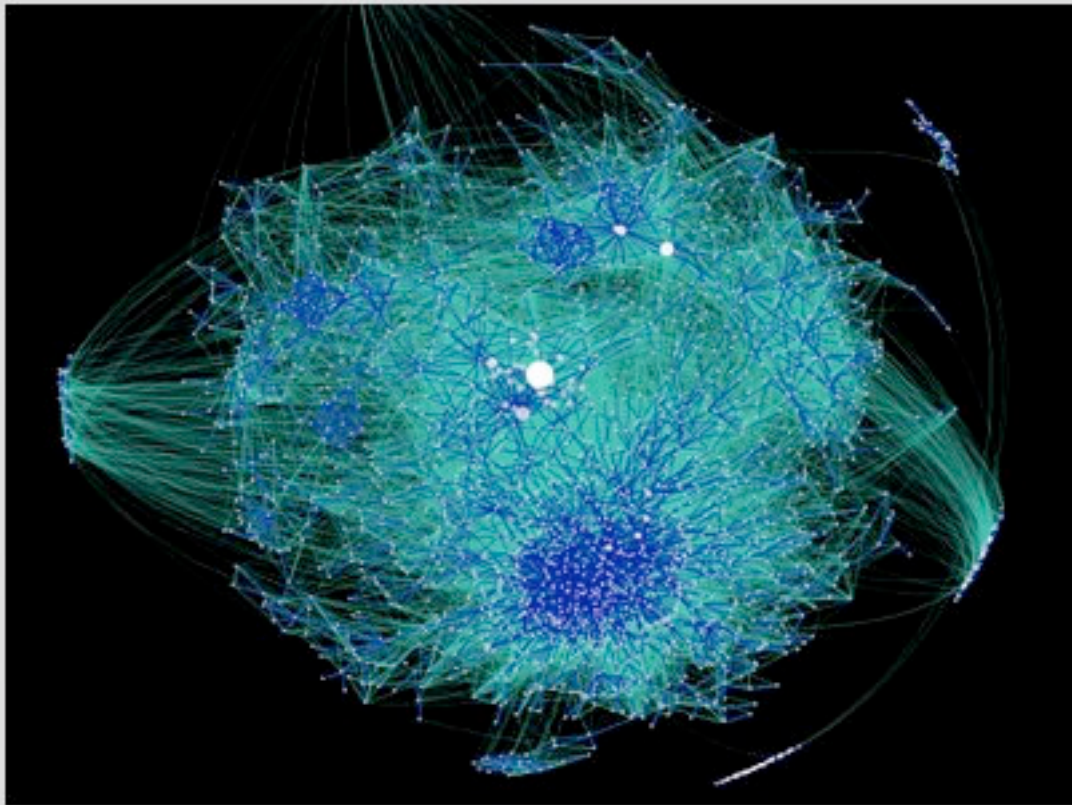
Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's painting 'Carpet Snake Dreaming', 1991-92.

Australian aboriginal cultures are characterised by their coherent and highly complex world-views, embedded in a web of narratives we know as the 'dreamtime'. These narratives were developed, sustained and shared through the use of ritual activities, such as corroboree, as well as through music and

visual artefacts. Historically these societies did not employ written language in the sense that this is understood in some other cultures – but theirs was, and is, a highly literate world; just not one based on writing. Clifford Possum's painting 'Carpet Snake Dreaming' is not just a painting of snakes approaching a water-hole or other site of interest. It is also a map of a terrain, most likely actual rather than imaginary. It is a container of a mythic narrative, evoking a story that for those who know it is as much history as parable. This artwork thus embodies knowledge and is not just a work of the imagination.

It could be argued that for the indigenous Australian walking and talking (language) are closely allied activities. The "walkabout" is a common characteristic of a hunter-gatherer culture but it can also be regarded as a form of performative mapping of culturally embodied knowledge. In this respect Tjapaltjarri's painting can be seen as the visualisation of this creative and knowledge generating/transferring activity.

James Leach (Leach 2003) describes creativity as not necessarily the outcome of creative practices, nor even something that is a process confined to defined creative practices, but rather as a form of common and essential social exchange that allows individuals and communities to bring themselves, their relationships and their communities into being. In a sense, Leach describes a everyday form of the performative as a constant creative activity. In this context the recent scandal concerning the contested authorship of the work of Tjapaltjarri and a number of other indigenous Australian artists, where works have been identified as inauthentic due to their having been authored in part by other family and tribal members, reveals not so much an abuse of the art market but rather a fundamental lack of understanding by those who manage and profit from this market of alternate and expanded notions of creativity, authorship and its potential value.



Visualisation of the blogosphere by Matthew Hurst 2007

In contemporary science we see graphic representation in ascendance over written text as the complexity of the data-sets involved increase beyond the capacity of the written word to contain them and our ability to interpret such information through text is tested to the limit. It is now often left to computers to interpret our complex data-sets for us, employing codes that are rarely, if ever, read by a human being. Knowledge is now created and disseminated via diverse media and codifying systems, invisible to us as often as they are visible. Rendering these invisible landscapes and networks in a manner by which we can apprehend them has become one of the functions of the contemporary artist, designer and informatician.

There could appear to be an interesting correlation between contemporary visualisations of various data-spaces and some indigenous Australian painting practices. In each form of visualisation knowledge is spatialised and rendered navigable.

Fernando Ortiz (Ortiz 1947) proposed the concept of 'transculturation', which may offer insights that will assist in apprehending how contemporary changes in culture and language have proceeded.

"I am of the opinion that the word transculturation better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word acculturation really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation."

The suggestion here is that we are all engaged in an interplay of cultural interactions and appropriations, which is now occurring within a world of highly mobile people's saturated with communications media. Language, a technology fundamental to the human condition, is the primary means by which this process occurs. The political implications suggested by this lead to the question; are we creating a universal 'neo-pidgin' or are our cultures fragmenting into linguistic ghettos? Are we witnessing the emergence of a new cultural hegemony or the collapse of old certainties?



A selection of ethnic costumes, Fanny's Play House Inc.

People define themselves through language and create their own sub-cultural linguistic fields, their own 'tribal' codes, in order to establish their identity and be identified by other members of their 'tribe'. This might be done through the clothes they wear, the language they employ or the means through which they transmit their messages. This is an iterative process where people evolve new dialects that in turn define self. Transculturation functions not only within the established context of the colonial but also the post-colonial, where human migration has proceeded, for multiple reasons, in multiple directions.

The concept of pluriliteracy (Garcia 2006) proposes that certain individuals and communities function within highly multilingual environments where multiple languages are employed in various contexts. A central feature of this model is that multiple languages are acquired at the same time but do not necessarily have similar value.

Transliteracy (Thomas et al 2007) is defined as “the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks (ibid).” In the media-saturated societies of today’s world it can be assumed that many people are transliterate, capable not only of interpreting information across media and linguistic forms but also translating information from one cultural context to another.

Thomas’s concept of transliteracy can be seen as related to Garcia’s idea of pluriliteracy, although transliteracy is less concerned with spoken and written language and rather with forms of linguistic activity involving other modalities of representation across numerous media. However, the arguments regarding one likely inform those of the other.

Does the notion of ‘transliteracy’ offer the possibility of reconciling cultural and linguistic differences whilst allowing difference to function. Or are these phenomena aspects of a bi-directional compacting, and potentially desiccating, dynamic? Does creative work with language that employs digital media necessarily expose these dynamic processes of signification?

Jay Bolter’s (Bolter) concept of remediation may also be relevant here, where he describes a world where our experiences of things come to us through media that themselves have been mediated by other media. We approach our traditional stories and myths as texts that have become theatre which have in turn become cinematic or tele-visual and then re-appropriated into the internet on YouTube or exploded through use in various forms of non-linear media, such as computer games. The consumers of such artefacts have become highly adept at not only reading remediated content but also at recognising how each stage of remediation represents the prior media as another signifier in the mix of signs. People today are experts at reading platforms across platforms.

To consider these questions it might prove useful to look at how an artist might create a work that responds to them. As it happens, a number of

authors and artists have concerned themselves with just these issues, amongst them John Cayley, a well known author in the field of digital poetics. He has also worked as a research librarian in the Chinese section of the British Library and as a translator. His interests have often engaged issues around translation, transliteration and remediation.

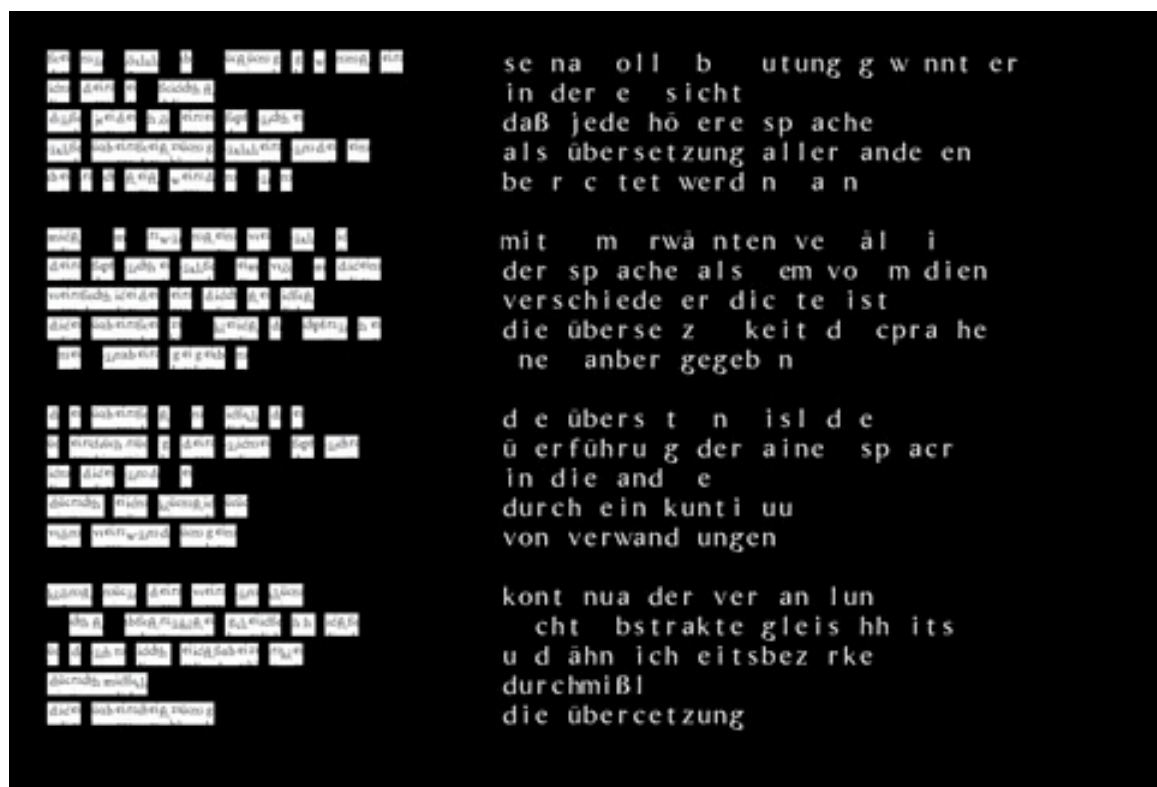


Image from Translation, by John Cayley with Giles Perring, www.shadoof.net

In Cayley's (with Giles Perring, audio) generative QuickTime based text and sound work 'Translation' (Cayley 2005) Cayley produces an ever-changing 'linguistic wall hanging' - as he refers to it (Cayley 2004) - the generative texts emerging at or beyond the limits of lissibility.

'Translation' functions across a number of languages, shifting from version to version, but nearly always incorporating English, German and French. The primary components of the work are not recognisable words from any specific language but rather the structural patterns that underlie written and spoken language. These are patterns that are visual or aural in their nature, where word 'shapes' are retained but their conventional semiotic capability severely

compromised. Cayley writes of language 'drowning' and 'resurfacing' throughout the work, suggesting that the legibility of the text is the necessary oxygen the reader requires and will always seek, even struggle, to find. What happens when that oxygen is removed and the 'text' abstracted to its material and a-semiotic components?



Image from Translation, by John Cayley with Giles Perring, www.shadoof.net

Cayley writes 'my literal art, has been involved, in terms of one of its most obvious formalisms, with transliteral morphing from one given text - transcribed in machine-encoded alphabetic script - to another' (ibid). Here Cayley explicitly employs the term transliteral to describe not a reader's literacy across media and signifiatory systems (as defined by Thomas et al) but to illuminate the automatic machine based algorithms that underpin the technical and conceptual nature of the artwork. As such, he conflates the technical with the cultural, evoking Terry Winograd's earlier observations on the relationship between language, culture and thought. As Winograd notes,

'The computer is a physical embodiment of the symbolic calculations envisaged by Hobbes and Leibniz. As such, it is really not a thinking machine, but a language machine. The very notion of 'symbol system' is inherently linguistic and what we duplicate in our programs with their rules and propositions is really a form of verbal argument, not the workings of mind' (Winograd 1991).

What Winograd is proposing here is that the computer is a form of writing; specifically automated writing. The context in which he makes this proposition is a discourse on artificial intelligence, his position being that computation is not so much concerned with the replication of thought but rather with language. Cayley has more or less taken this idea literally and built an instance of a language machine that functions to embody it, focusing on the structural aspects of how such a machine might work.

'Translation' takes as its source text fragments of Walter Benjamin's essay, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (Benjamin 1916). As an active translator Cayley is acutely aware of what Benjamin refers to as the 'kinship' of languages and how translation is not so much concerned with similarity but an 'affinity of difference'. I take this to mean a structural correspondence where the difference between components can be seen to be similar to one another, even when the instrumentality of languages can seem extremely alien to one another. This concept would appear not unrelated to Derrida's intent when coining the term 'différance' (Derrida 1982), Cayley's automated script evoking an infinite deferral of meaning but never compromising our apprehension of an instance of language that is writing itself.

Cayley's abstracting of a text into an a-semiotic but nevertheless profoundly linguistic phenomena can be seen to be evoking this 'affinity of difference' in its emphasis on structure and the internal relations of the work rather than through presenting associations between signifiers and the things they signify. The question thus arises whether the 'text' that Cayley has produced is one composed of signs or whether something more concrete than that? What are

the signifiers that compose this work, when they have no signified associated with them? Perhaps they only signify themselves or, otherwise, they speak of writing itself.

Given our earlier observations about the visible and invisible languages that compose our transliterate culture perhaps the distinction that is sustained between that which signifies and that which is abstract becomes meaningless as we recognise that meaning is dependent on its context and the internal relations of signs are as unfixed as their relations with that which they represent.

Similarly, as implied in Garcia's concept of pluriliteracy, the manner in which people construct and sustain their identities is a function of their relations with others and with things and is thus highly fluid. We can be many different people, our characteristics contingent on how we interface with others. It has become a common observation to note how people construct their identities, in social environments such as Second Life, and how these constructs can differ from how these same people present/construct themselves as a function of other relational contexts. Self has always been a negotiated construct, our social interactions mediating our being.

Cayley's artwork evokes how the internal structures of language may remain discernable, irrespective of context and association. Perhaps our constructed and contingent human identities also retain discernable internal relations. However, the idea of an authentic self, to be discovered within its internal organisation like a fingerprint, seems difficult to sustain as it is a relational construct. There might be no productive purpose in questioning the authenticity of such (social) constructs as self-hood or language. It might be more productive to query the polymorphic character of how these dynamics interact, each (the self, the social, language) informing the other in a generative cycle, similar to how the various elements in 'Translation' are contingent on their relations with one another to determine their further emergence.

It could be argued that there is nothing new about so called 'new media' and that the idea of computation is not novel. If we agree with Winograd that the computer is language then we might also accept that language is computational, extending this to our understanding of language and recognising its autopoietic character (Maturana 1980). Perhaps culture, like language, can be considered as a network of constantly regenerating relations? If so then the implication is that technology is not the cause of change but rather the material manifestation of the social, technology's most pervasive materialisation being in the form of language. In this sense the dynamics of the relational can be regarded as akin to those of the poetic and also the computational.

Simon Biggs

Edinburgh, September 2008

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